

Sommarles – reading as a competition. What impact a reading campaign has on a small library in Norway

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Abstract:

The national, digital campaign “Sommarles.no” started in 2014 and is almost every public library in Norway participates in it. The campaign has changed the way many libraries work during summertime. The final goal is to encourage an interest in reading and ensure that the children read as much as possible through their long summer vacation by using elements of computer games in the campaign.

Keywords: Summer read campaign; Children; Public Library; Reading promotion; Reading campaign

Introduction

Summer in Norway means vacation, but also reading time for many children! The national, digital campaign Sommarles.no, organized by almost every public library in Norway, wants to give great reading experiences to as many children as possible all over the country.

Forde Library; Norway has 674 public libraries and mobile libraries (including a library boat). The municipality of Forde constitutes a region of almost 600 km² and has 13,106 inhabitants (as of 1.1.2019). Our public library (Forde library) is located within a cultural center. The center Førdehuset is combined with a theatre, a cinema, a cafe, a sports hall, a swimming pool, a music festival, art school and more. The library had in 2018 78.650 visitors and a collection of 60.000 books and other media. Opening hours are Monday through Saturday, and seven librarians do a great job to support the community with library services.

A digital campaign for reading

Sommarles (which means Summer-read) is a national, digital reading campaign organized by public libraries in Norway. The campaign runs yearly from June 1st to August 31st and is

free for all children from 1st to 7th grade. The goal is to encourage an interest in reading and ensure that the children read as much as possible through a long summer vacation. By using elements from computer games, Sommarles has become a popular summer activity for many children since it was first launched in Vestfold County in 2014.

Sommarles.no was created, developed and is owned by Vestfold County Library, the Vestfold Libraries and a private company Snuti AS. The company is in charge of the design, develops and maintains the technical solutions and answer questions connected to this. Sommarles is now a national program and each year, there are two County Libraries responsible for the competition, and each County Library is responsible for two years at a time. In 2018 and 2019, Telemark County Library and Finnmark County Library are responsible. A responsibility requires a lot of resources, time, planning and logistics from those who participate in the project together with Snuti AS. Since this is a free program, all participating libraries and county libraries participate in sharing the costs.

Sommarles is completely free for all children. On the website www.sommarles.no the children collect XP (points) for each page they read, do tasks connected to the reading, follow friends to see what they read and earn digital trophies. They can also earn small prizes that they collect at their local library. They can follow a story written by Mari Moen Holsve, written exclusively for Sommarles and only available online. In 2019, over 130.000 children all over the country have participated so far.

Sommarles collaborates with other NGOs supporting children's reading (Leser søker bok (Books for Everyone), Foreningen Les (Association Read) and Norsk lyd- og blindeskrift bibliotek (The Norwegian Library of Talking Books and Braille Books) to create the best reading experience for as many children as possible. The Sommerles-story is also available in audiobook format and our two official forms of written Norwegian and Sami language.

Research

“Summer Reading Loss” – refers to the decline in reading development children experience over the summer holidays. It is a challenge, and a well-documented phenomenon in research literature from the US and Europe. (Heynes 1978). Earlier studies from the US show that weak readers can lose up to three months of reading development during the summer holidays. In practice, this indicates that the weak readers are returning to the level they were at in Easter-time in reading development. Strong readers lose less reading skills over the summer, and so the gap between the strong and the weak readers becomes reinforced.

Fiore, C. & Roman S. (2010) found following implications from the studies

1.1 in US about summer reading program:

- Students who participated in the public library summer reading
- program maintained and increased reading skills.
- More girls than boys participated in summer reading programs.
- Recreational reading outside of school made a difference in improving reading scores.
- The public library was accessible to all students, no matter the socioeconomic status.

The research that Fiore and Roman did is now 10 years old, but it is still valid and shows some of the same results in practice in our library and municipality in Forde, Norway.

In 2019, there will be new research available concerning Norwegian students and our digital summer reading Campaign. The research is conducted by The National Library of Norway with Sommerles.no, Møreforsking Molde and Volda University College. They will also research collaboration between school and public library on the campaign Sommarles. They will examine data material from over 105 000 children who participated in Sommarles.no in 2018, 1997 parents, 221 librarians and 227 teachers. We are looking forward to see the analysis work completed.

Preliminary results from this research confirm what we in Forde also have experienced the last years. There is plenty to gain from better collaboration between school and library. We see that the best way to reach out to the children is when we as librarians collaborate in springtime with schools and teachers. It is essential to spend time before the summer holidays sharing information and informing about Sommerles.no to the students. Good knowledge of the campaign among the librarians and all library staff is important to get the children participating. We have experienced that a relatively small effort can make a very big difference - because after the children are registered, the webpage and the library takes care of the follow-up work. The children then independently borrow and read books, record what they have read and collect points on the website Sommarles.no.

Boys reading

National testing conducted over the last year show that the boys are struggling more with reading than earlier, also in our community. The schools, the library and reading-programs focus on reading-skills for boys. The campaign Sommarles focus on boys participating in the reading competition.

1.1.1 Statistics from Sommarles:

Year	Country/library	Boys	Users	Students	Participation
2017	Norway	42,8%	56 455	296 650	19%
	Forde	44,3%	219	1 271	17,2%
2018	Norway	43,1%	105 319	415 415	25,4%
	Forde	41,6%	377	1 312	28,7%
2019 (18.8.19)	Norway	43,4%	130 178	437 049	29,8%
	Forde	41,7%	456	1 325	34,4%

There are still more girls than boys that participate in the summer reading programs. 41,7% of the students that participate in our summer read competition this year are boys. While we

reach out to more students, we are not reaching as many boys as girls. We see that both boys and girls like that it is a digital reading-competition. The boys tell us that they like the fact that the competition uses gaming elements from computer games like levels and developing avatars. They like the prizes as much as the girls do. However, we have to look more closely at our library collection, and how we present the literature for the children. Since there are only women working at the library, and the reading pavilion is decorated with flowers, are we appealing more to girls than to boys? However, despite this, a positive outcome is that the number of boys in Sommarles has doubled since 2017, and not stagnated.

Sommarles in Forde

Forde library has arranged a local summer reading campaign since 2010. The first year 120 children participated and the campaign became a success. When we started summer reading campaigns were a well-known program in several public libraries in Norway. Over the next six years, we made our own campaign, in which 100 – 250 children participated every summer. Originally, it was a traditional analogue campaign with diplomas, ending with a big party in autumn, celebrating the participants and the child who had read the most books.

When the digital Sommarles became a national competition in 2017, it was a slow start for the participation in Forde. We struggled to reach out to the teachers and the schools. There were several arguments against Sommarles as a digital competition. Why should they use the computer when they should be reading books? We struggled to get the parents engaged. Why should they help the children to participate? A parent is required to register their email and allow the child to use the program, which should be fine to expect following the GDPR (The EU General Data Protection Regulation).

During the summer of 2018, we experienced a change. We had held the digital competition once, and it was less scary! It was fun for the children who tended to read more, and we got positive feedback from the parents and children that participated! We had all the leaflets and information we had made the year before and the marketing schedule for the programming at the library. We knew better when to contact schools, how to organize prizes, how to prepare information for teachers, create exhibitions in the library and so on. We had a much better strategy for using the available material and a plan for using it.

Furthermore, in 2018, as national program, participation increased to 105 319 students from communities all over Norway. 1/3 of all students in the participating communities were registered as a part of Sommarles. This led to a lot of publicity on national TV-stations and in newspapers that helped engage parents, as well as children.

This summer, 2019 the program is still growing. We see that parents are now more active. It is common and kind of expected that the children participate in the program. There are still 2 more weeks and we expect even more children participating. We have doubled from 17,2% to 34,4% in three years. Media and schools focus on the importance of recreational reading outside of school, and how it make a difference in improving reading scores for the students. This also show the importance of the libraries and accessibility to books for all children, no matter their socioeconomic status. Visiting the library is an important part of the campaign (borrowing books, retrieving passwords, winning prizes). With many small one-person library in Norway, we also have libraries that are closed during the summer. Opening hours, flexibility and cooperation between municipalities, schools, families and libraries is important in order for Sommarles to be a successful national program.

Summertime is also vacation-time for the staff at public library. Earlier we planned extra removal (weeding) of materials and cleaning in the library in the summer. Not in the last two years. The visits and loans exploded the first week after school ended! We did not have enough books for children and parents! In addition, the loans for adults also increased, as more adults visit the library with their children.

We consider this another positive benefit of the program. Forde library had a total of 27,858 loans (with renewals) as of July 2018. This year, the numbers has increased to 31,242, which represents an increase of almost 11% more loans.

Our library focuses on how to meet the children participating in the competition. How we as librarians meet the children and as well as positive feedback for the reading. The prizes, including bags, bracelets, frisbees, rubbers and so on, are nicely presented for the children in a little box, and the children can pick the gifts themselves.

Now we are looking forward to a big Sommarles-party in September. Our library is too small to welcome 500 children and parents at the same time so we have rented a big hall. It will be a real party with games, entertainment and a celebration of the readers. In past years, every child that participated got a diploma and a book as a present. With almost 500 participants, there will be some changes in the program with more games and less gifts.

Sommarles 2020:

We hope this competition will continue for 2020 and that next year the program will be available as an app. Children do not only use computers but phones to communicate. We hope that the developers will increase the level of gamification through an integrated game for the website. We think that this is essential to reach out to boys.

Children need help from the parents, and in a multicultural society, parents do not always have the language or digital skills necessary to help the child to participate in the competition. When signing up for Sommarles we ask for the email of a guardian and the guardian must agree and consent to the child joining the campaign. It is important that the library communicate to the schools and parents that we (librarians) can help the parents to get access to the program early, and provide good literature for the child. In addition, the library has computers and staff ready to serve the children and families in cooperation with the school.

A digital competition has the possibility of providing feedback to the library and to the researcher. The staff at the library are communicating directly with the children. We accept all the books (with a few limits) in the programme and it is fun to see how the participation grows. It also has great possibilities for feedback from parents, users and libraries to the developers of Sommarles.

Earlier all libraries had their own summer reading program with different rules and logos. With Sommarles, the children experience the same design, the same characters, and can pick up the prizes at (almost) any library in the entire country. Sommarles shows the importance public libraries have in supporting children's reading skills.

The most fun is that the children come back every year! Parents read. Families read and reading competitions works!

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